

Date: Fri, 22 Aug 1997 17:11:20 -0400
To: lederberg@rockvax.rockefeller.edu
From: "William J. McGuire" <william.mcguire@yale.edu>
Subject: Tactics and strategy of research

22 August 1997

To: Prof. Joshua Lederberg
Email: lederberg@rockvax.rockefeller.edu

From: Bill McGuire

Subject: Tactics and strategy of research

Your 8/18/97 "heuristic" email made several interesting comments about the strategy versus tactics of research. We seem to agree that scientific methodology, its teaching and practice, seems to concentrate on nitty-gritty tactics (e.g., manipulation and measurement of variables) to the neglect of strategic planning and programmatic research. My Annual Review chapter on creative heuristics was confined to tactics. However, I do try to teach strategic planning in my methods courses, in large part by providing and discussing worksheets that guide the student through successive steps in strategically planning a whole program of research. I have just completed such a worksheet (for students in my "Methods in Personality Research" course that begins on 4 September). I'll send a copy by snail mail, although it is not worth a close reading by anyone unless he or she is really interested in doing personality research (or in getting an "A" in the course).

You mention Luttwak's "On Strategy." I am most interested in his distinction between ritual strategy versus physical strategic use in the development of military force. My own research being less famous than yours, I should explain that my work focuses on how communications can be designed cost effectively to persuade people (e.g., in political campaigns or in health campaigns to con people into adopting more healthful lifestyles). One of the more occult subareas of the social influence theorizing on this topic deals with the use of ritual communication (e.g., by demonstrations, terrorist acts, showing the flag, "for England and for England's King!", etc.) rather than use of explicit argumentation to persuade.

Luttwak's work shows that even in deploying the military, ritual display may be more effective than physically more effective deployment of forces. This is not just "showing the flag" by ceremonial fleet visits or Persian Gulf deployment. For example, proper strategic use of the Roman army to defend its long frontier (Danube, Rhine, Hadrian's wall, etc.) called for putting a few legions spread out thinly on the border (as on the DMZ in Korea now) while keeping the main forces concentrated well in the rear as strategic reserve. However, instead of this, the Romans resorted to a strategic ritual display of power (even if risky) by putting most of the legions up at the frontier, to cow the barbarians at the wall or river bank, so inhibiting their ever getting started on an invasion. It worked, after a fashion, for a few centuries. (You might be tempted to again raise against this claim of success your "empirical falsifiability" criterion, but who's counting). Another example is the U.S. Army's ritual strategy, during the closing years of the Viet Nam war, designed to "send a message" to

Hanoi rather than to destroy enemy forces or occupy territory. I guess no one in Hanoi was listening. Too bad they didn't have as many cellular phones then as now.

Sincerely,

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